

WOMEN AND ALIENATION IN SHERWOOD ANDERSON'S WINESBURG OHIO; A FEMINIST READING

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at a feminist reading of Sherwood Anderson's novel Winesburg, Ohio, which addresses the themes of alienation and estrangement and pursues their profound effects on women. This study investigates the image of the woman in many short stories; such as, "Mother", "Death", "Tandy". In addition, it points out to the traditional portrayal of female characters, the role of patriarchy and the different forms of discrimination which social practices against women: a mother, a wife, and a girl; in these stories. The research; moreover, sheds light on alienation; a major concept in modernism; the era in which the setting of the stories takes place. Thus, estrangement deepens women's and plights in a non- feminist world.

KEYWORDS: Alienation, Discrimination, Feminism, Modernism & Traditional Gender Roles

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INTRODUCTION

Modern Western literature witnesses iconoclastic changes in the content which, in turns, have their profound impacts on the literary canon. Many mainstream writers start to break with the norms of their times and they depict the plights of women as well as their miseries. These issues characterize the content of their literary products.

Estrangement is a modern feature which emerges as a result of the innovations in technology and the lack of faith in the late nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. While it leaves its deep effects upon the female and male characters, women suffer more because of their gender. The theme of alienation marks the works of many modern novels; such as Sherwood Anderson's novel Winesburg, Ohio.

Sherwood Anderson investigates the issues and plights of women in his Winesburg Ohio. It could be argued that this novel reflects the ability of mainstream male novelists to highlight the issues of women in masculine societies. Catherine Beasley confirms that some feminists employ the idea of sameness or the possibility of deconstructing the mainstream stories by men and women. (Beasley,1999)

THEORY

The aim of this paper is to examine the theme of alienation and its profound influence upon the female characters; therefore, there is a feminist reading of selected stories in the novel. The analysis of the novel throws light on some major feminist principles and issues which many feminist critics highlight. Lois Tyson indicates that the feminist activity, including feminist theory, has a crucial goal to change the world by promoting gender equality. Thus, feminism examines the ways in which literature explains the different kinds of oppression that are practiced against women. (Tyson,1999)

Lois Tyson confirms that traditional gender roles portray men as superior, rational, strong, protective, and decisive humans. (Tyson,1999) The same author argues that patriarchy is sexist and it is biased towards the belief that women are innately inferior to men. Moreover, Barbara Milech confirms that: "patriarchy, that literally means to rule by father, signifies any society in which males systematically hold the balance of power, and women are systematically subordinated to them. The feminist perception is that our culture is fundamentally patriarchal". (Milech, 1991)

Patriarchal ideology suggests that there are only two identities a woman can have. She is a "good girl" if she accepts the traditional gender roles and the rules of patriarchy; otherwise, she is a 'bad girl". The concepts of "good" girl and "bad" girl are manifestations of the patriarchal male- chauvinist agenda. These concepts mean the inferiority of women and the desire to control women. Women can only be wives and mothers. (Tyson, 1999) "The good girl" is rewarded for her "good" behavior by being placed on "a pedestal by patriarchal culture" whereas the bad girl is punished by exclusion from society and death. (Tyson, 1999). Tyson adds that: "Pedestals are small and leave a woman with very little room to do anything but fulfill the prescribed role". (Tyson, 1999)

Barbara Milech points out, indirectly, to the theme of women's alienation. She argues that the central feminist themes are: silence, difference, and desire. "She is man's complement: wife, mother, and reflection." She is a function of the masculine project of self- definition." (Milech, 1991) Moreover, the woman is portrayed as being an emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive. (Milech, 1991)

Feminists try to deconstruct the traditional binary oppositions which dominate the western thought and narrative as the following table clarifies:

Table 1

Man	Woman
Public	Private
Rational	Emotional
Strong	Weak
Good	Evil
Adam	Eve

This paper examines the themes of alienation and despair; therefore, it is significant to throw light on many theories which depict the theme of alienation. Carl Marx, for instance, points out to the term of alienation as the detachment of harmonious things: "Marx's theory of alienation or estrangement refers to the separation of things that naturally belong together, or to put antagonism between things that are properly in harmony". <http://www.wikipedia.org>

Moreover, alienation as a definition means: "A feeling of not belonging. This feeling can be physical, mental, religious, spiritual, psychological, political, social, or economic and often it tends to be a combination of more than one of these types. Alienation is a driving force that pushes the human conscience to extremes". <http://www.exampleessays.com>

DISCUSSIONS

This paper is an investigation of the theme of alienation and its profound impact on women in a traditional society, so there is a feminist reading of the stories of "Mother", "Death", "Tandy" which represent the mother, the wife, and the single girl.

Winesburg, Ohio starts with the prologue of an old writer who imagines people as being "grotesques" who become obsessed with certain ideas which become truths for them. Therefore, they become aliens and foreigners in their

town when they fail to communicate with each other.

"Mother" is the story of Elizabeth Willard, the female grotesque, and the mother of the major character in the novel, George. Elizabeth falls a victim of a patriarchal husband; Tom Willard. She is old and ill and her problems with her husband leave profound effects on her personality. She suffers and becomes alien because of the lack of love and care; the reasons which affect her relationship with her son, George.

"Death" depicts the story of Elizabeth, who becomes a grotesque because of her husband's cold emotions. In the story, Elizabeth meets with Dr. Reefy, whom she loves, and she reveals some of her secrets to him. She confesses that her marriage to Tom is not a marriage of love and she depicts the circumstances which lead to her unhappy marriage to Tom.

"Tandy" is the story of the drunkard who meets with Tom Hard; the atheist person. The drunkard loves Tom's daughter and he calls her "Tandy". The girl suffers from her father's negligence and lack of interest insists that she is "Tandy".

It is important to notice that the settings of these stories refer to the late nineteenth century; (1880s). At that time, women in the United States and Europe struggled to depict their plights and troubles. Therefore, they began to establish women's movements which ask for the equality of rights between sexes. Will Jameson says that: "The book [Winesburg, Ohio] is not an authentic representation of life in the Midwest in 1900 as the focus is on the struggles of alienated individuals... There are no happily married couples, no united families". (Jameson, 2003)

The first story which will be analyzed in the paper is "Mother". The heroine of the story, Elizabeth Willard, suffers alienation, despair, frustration, and depression because of the prejudice and discrimination of the masculine powers and the gender roles in her society. The injustice of the town's people against Elizabeth starts when she was a young woman. Everybody questions her morality and she is accused of being a shameful woman. She is described as being a "bad girl" because she violates the roles of her masculine society. In the novel, it is mentioned that: "In her girlhood and before marriage with Tom Willard, Elizabeth had borne a somewhat shaky reputation in Winesburg." (Anderson, 1969) Moreover, the story depicts that Elizabeth enjoys a different image from the majority of the women in Winesburg. For instance, she tries to get rid of the boundaries of the home, which are imposed on women at her times. She works and mixes with men, and she seeks to get rid of the life of town because it is boring and different from the city. It is mentioned that:

For years she had been what is called "stage- struck" and had paraded through the streets with traveling men guests of her father's hotel, wearing loud clothes and urging them to tell her of life in the cities out of which that had come. Once she startled the town by putting on men's clothes and riding a bicycle down Main Street. (Anderson, 1969)

Elizabeth represents a new image of a woman who tries to defy the traditional masculine roles of her society. She rebels against the norms of patriarchy in her society. It is mentioned that: "First there was an uneasy desire for change (Anderson, 1969) Also, the woman has a hope of leaving the town and wandering the world: "She expressed her dream of joining a theatrical company and wandering the world" (Anderson, 1969) Moreover, it is mentioned that Elizabeth has the will to get introduced to people: "seeing always new faces and giving something out of herself to all people." (Anderson, 1969) According to the text, Elizabeth wants a deep and real change. But, her society does not take her demands seriously because she is a woman who does not have the right to express herself or to work outside the home.

Lois Tyson argues that the "good girl: "has no needs of her own, for she is completely satisfied by serving her

family". (Tyson, 1999) However, she [Elizabeth] is misunderstood, "But "They [members of theatrical company] did not seem to know what she meant, or if she did get something of her passion expressed, they only laughed." (Anderson, 1969)

The town does not offer means of entertainment and leisure for the residents; therefore, Elizabeth joins the theater company in order to find alternative solutions for the isolation, loneliness, and boring life she has. But, she is looked upon as complementary to men. Simone de Beauvoir points out to the hierarchal relationship between men and women assumed in the concept of 'different, but complementary: "Man is the Absolute" whereas a woman is a secondary- rate man and she is the other. (Beasley, 1999)

Elizabeth is misunderstood; the town's people question her morality because she defies the norms of her society and opposes the traditional image of the woman in her town. Thus, she is forced to get married to Tom, who worked as a clerk in the hotel when he was a young man. She falls into a victim because of the injustice of the anti- feminist society of her town which mocks her demands as a woman and underestimates her needs. Therefore, she suffers alienation that is deepened by her marriage to Tom. When Elizabeth gets married, she is restricted by the boundaries of her home and she submits to the power of her patriarchal husband whom she depends on. Glen A. Love argues that the portrayal of Elizabeth confirms the feminist theme of silence: "The characterization of the young hero's [George Willard] parents parallels Anderson's published recollections of his own father and mother- the mysterious, dark- haired, silent- mother and the boastful, pretensions father." (Loves, 1968,) Moreover, John O'Neill clarifies that: "Neglect and exploitation by more or less unappreciative males were experiences which Anderson guiltily associated with his own mother." (O'Neill, 1977) Anderson's mother is similar to Elizabeth who suffers negligence and discrimination. Tom Willard represses Elizabeth's need for love and he does not show her respect. Thus, she is emotionally and physically oppressed.

The story puts on emphasis upon isolation and darkness which surround Elizabeth. It is mentioned that: "Between Elizabeth and her one son George there was a deep, unexpected bond of sympathy, based on a girlhood dream that had long ago died." (Anderson, 1969) Thus, Elizabeth becomes isolated and detached from her son; George. They are unable to communicate in a normal way: "in the evening when the son sat in the room with his mother, the silence made them both feel awkward." (Anderson, 1969) Elizabeth, therefore, suffers emotional and social loneliness and the contact between George and she becomes formal.

Tom Willard, Elizabeth' husband, represents misogyny and patriarchy in the story. He is described as being the leading Democrat in the Republican community and has his interests in politics. Also, he runs the hotel. He is compared to the pretentious and boastful Anderson's fathers. Also, Tom Willard keeps mocking women, including his wife. She is neglected, and silence surrounds her. She is rejected by her husband and her society. Tom neglects his wife and underestimates her emotional needs. It is mentioned that:

Tom Willard was ambitious for his son. He had always thought of himself as a successful man, although nothing he turned out successfully. Once he asks his son when a friend of him asked him if George is "a gawky girl: "I told Will that. You're [sic] not a fool and you're [sic] not a woman. You're the Tom Willard's son and you'll wake up". (Anderson, 1969)

Women are looked upon as mere objects who provide men with their desires and financial needs. Their concerns or interests are trivialized and they are not taken seriously. In addition, the misogyny of her husband reinforces the state of frustration and depression she lives. L. Janice Williams discusses the different factors which reinforce the state of

alienation. She confirms that:

Death, disease, and disability are alienating circumstances which inform the literature of alienation. Janice Williams states that they are not the only situations that lead to exclusion from the mainstream. She stresses the powers of racism and sexism. Moreover, she adds to them personal alienation, whether it is self-imposed or created by the dominant society in which the "Other", the alien, lives. (Williams, 1997) Moreover, Helen Cixous confirms "All women are exiles" (Cixous, 1972).

In "Death", the female character, Elizabeth, reveals more of the secrets of her past. She suffers the death of her mother who dies when she was five years old. Her father raises her up; however, he suffers alienation. "Her father was a man who had wanted to be let alone and the affairs of the hotel would not let him alone." (Anderson, 1969) Elizabeth decides to marry when she becomes eighteen years old because she thinks it is the time to get married. Although she has many affairs, she decides to marry. She wishes to have a real love. At her time, "Other girls of her age in Winesburg were marrying men she had always known, grocery clerks or young farmers". (Anderson, 1969) She insists on marriage because she does not want to be a single woman who is described as a shameful woman, she says: "I didn't want to be a bad woman. The town was full of stories about me. I even began to be afraid Tom would change his mind." (Anderson, 1969)

After her marriage of many years, Elizabeth lives in total darkness. Men in the past were attracted to her and they manipulated her; the reason made her loose reputation. Her father, who is described as alien is detached from her. Her husband stands for the masculinity in his society and participated in her punishment because she epitomizes the concept of the "bad girl". She is bad because she violates the norms of patriarchy and the roles of gender in her town. She dies after her meeting with Dr. Reefy because her husband represses her needs as a woman and does not fulfill her desires. It could be argued that her death represents the spiritual death of a woman who suffers emotional frustration, loneliness, and negligence of her husband.

"Tandy" depicts the image of a female child who suffers from her father's, Tom Hard, cold emotions and his negligence and the lack of his attention off her. Her father is another masculine figure who trivializes his daughter's needs, and he never shows her care or passion. The child; therefore, suffers because she needs love. Her mother died many years ago, and her father is engaged in his arguments about religion and the existence of God. He does not provide her with attention, but he leaves her to her relatives to take care of her. Therefore, the girl suffers alienation. "Her father gave her but little attention and her mother were dead... Half forgotten [the nameless child], lived here and there on the bounty of her dead mother's relatives". (Anderson, 1969) A nameless girl can be a symbol of a neglected female identity.

The child remains nameless till a drunkard, a guest of her father comes and sees in her the promising woman and wife. The drunkard mentions that: "there is a woman coming," he said [the drunkard], "They think it's easy to be a woman, to be loved, but I know better," he declared. Again he turned to the child. "I understand," he [the drunkard] cried. (Anderson, 1969)

The drunkard is attracted to [the nameless girl or Tandy]. He wants her to be the woman whom he desires. Also, he looks at her as a mere object. It is noteworthy that the girl cries and tells her father that she wants to be Tandy. She wants love, care, and identity. Judith Arcana argues that "Tandy" contains Winesburg's most explicit statement of the theme: the need of men for women. wanting to make women into "a thing to love". Judith Arcana maintains that:

Tandy is open and lacking love. She does not have a name and has no warmth and color. She is eager and hungry

for emotion. Although she is female, she needs feeding. The drunkard sees in her a vessel into which he can pour his desire, and out of which he may drink to sustain himself. She attracts the stranger who sees what her father could not see. (Arcana, 1987) The same author, Arcana, states that: "Anderson honored women in that fatal mode, we may call pedestalization- he set women apart from and above men, insisting that they had not only the power to give men life but the obligation to sustain and uplift them as well". (Arcana, 1987)

CONCLUSIONS

Sherwood Anderson struggles to understand, delineate, and express his feeling about the interplay between masculine and feminine, male and female, although he believes that industrialization and urbanization breaks, by the turn of the century, men, and women. His male characters, despite disappointment and discouragement of female characters, see what Anderson feels men should get from women, a care-taking and nurturance.

The image of female characters in the previously mentioned stories proves that woman suffers double oppression because of her gender and the feeling of estrangement from her society. The role of woman as nourishing of man's needs is focused upon in the stories. The author, thus, tries to emphasize upon the heroism of women who provide men with their needs and love whereas their needs are neglected. As a result, women's plights and miseries deepen because of the social and cultural oppression and because of alienation and because of the sequences of the advent of modernism which the American society witnesses as a result of urbanization and industrialization.

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